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DEAR UNCLE MAX

Send questions to Dear Uncle Max, AGO National Headquarters, 475 Riverside Dr., Suite 1260, New York, NY 10115.

Please help me to understand the latest thing in synthesizers: the computerized interactive piano-organ. David Van Koevering's instrument will play anything ever published by way of the Internet. It would seem that professional organists and their abilities may no longer be needed by churches or anybody else. What's going on anyway?

P.D.S., Fla.

Even if I thought I could answer your questions, I suspect I wouldn't dare. Your questions are right on the edge of things with their relevance. I tried to get a very well-informed organist to answer for me. "Not on your life." I tried to get an organbuilder who is certainly aware of the latest developments. "No way." Who then? No need to be an organist, so I asked Richard Cornell, composer, conductor, and director of the Electronic Music Studio at the School for the Arts at Boston University, a colleague and friend, if he would be interested in answering. He, being gracious and generous, said, "Sure, I don't know anything about David Van Koevering's instrument, but I'll see what I can find on the Internet. Writing about synthesizers is a bit like trying to nail jello on the kitchen wall. By the time we say anything, there is something new!" This is his answer:

Digital synthesis has become extremely efficient, inexpensive, and sonically sophisticated. The instruments are widely available and are employed in all levels of the music industryhome entertainment, multimedia, corporate presentation, advertising, film scoring, in theatrical productions, and in the pop recording industry. However, in research institutions, university computer music centers, and personal studios, old and new synthesis models are used in realizing all sorts of serious compositional projects. Some of the synthesis and processing methods now employed exist only in software packages. It is a very complex field and one that is highly volatile. Voltage-controlled, subtractive, and distortion synthesis of the 1980s was set aside in favor of frequency modulation in the late '80s. FM was eclipsed by "wave-table" technology-still widespread-in the '90s. Newer methods, such as waveguide (physical modeling), have already been implemented in commercially available devices.

Synthesizers continue to be a rich field for composers in their research into the phenomenon of sound, the basic material substance of their art.



In commercial synthesizers, there are two important models. One, the workstation approach, emphasizes complete access to programming and sound design. Extremely complex software architecture offers the ambitious composer/designer/researcher control over literally thousands of parameters per sound. Examples of these include the Kurzweil K2500 series and the Korg Trinity and Z1.

The second model usually offers a thousand or so sounds in a small box that can be controlled in performance via computer interface (MIDI) or its own keyboard. There are far too many to mention, but Alesis and Roland are primary movers in this area. These are very little different from the multimedia sound cards in personal computers, and they typically use high-quality samples (recordings) of actual instruments as a source. Some of these units are limited to a basic collection of 128 sounds, known as General MIDI (GM), enough for hobbyists and recreational use in computer games, but not enough for the serious professional. The best of these instruments provide a simulacrum of acoustic instruments that won't fool anybody with two ears.

Such a General MIDI sound engine (by E-mu) is at the heart of the Van Koevering Interactive Piano[™]. The marketing gurus assure us that it is "the music teacher's challenge to the Nintendo® game." Students, we are told, will find practicing fun. Unfortunately, they will be bored by the sound. Anything the VKIP[™] does, including its Karaoke capability, can be duplicated by attaching an 88-key MIDI controller to a home multimedia computer, and installing the right software. Perhaps its advantage is that it is a dedicated system—a piano-like cabinet with a personal computer cum MIDI keyboard stuffed inside. While the amplification system is robust, the sound engine produces only the most "vanilla" instrumental sounds-Nintendo® in high fidelity is, alas, still Nintendo®.

With 40 auto-accompaniment features, and reverb to boot, it inherits the legacy of the player piano that graced the parlors of our grandparents. In the '60s, my uncle would regularly embarrass us by playing "Nearer my God to thee" against the bossa-nova beat on his Conn home entertainment organ. He referred to himself as a "Conn artist." Too bad he didn't have a Van Koevering Interactive Piano[™]. We could have recorded his performance and enjoyed it to this day.

Fun for the recreational user, but not ready for professional prime time.

I am very grateful to Dr. Cornell for taking his valuable time to write a response. (Besides, I got a tour of the studio with its banks of keyboards and enough switches, speakers, and gadgetry to make the console of the Wanamaker organ seem like the safety of a mother's arms.) Details on the Van Koevering Interactive Music Technology can be had on the Internet <http:// www.vankoevering.com>. Dr. Cornell recommends Joel Chadabe's book, Electronic Sound: The Past and the Promise of Electronic Music (1997), published by Prentice Hall, for those who want to go deeply into the subject.

What's going on anyway? Clearly, the production of electronic sounds is progressing at a rapid rate. The view ahead is a bit misty and I suspect I see a curve coming that makes predictions useless; however, the rearview mirror shows how far we have come since Mr. Thaddeus Cahill, 1867-1934, invented his fantastic \$200,000, 20-ton Telharmonium (he preferred the name Dynamophone) in 1906. Its piano soundboard loudspeakers got replaced by telephone receivers with large paper horns attached. He built a second instrument, installed in Telharmonic Hall in New York, on which daily concerts were presented and transmitted to subscribers on lines drawn through the telephone network conduits. Its signals were so strong, it effectively cut off conversations on the phones and the AT&T company cancelled its contract. With three keyboards, up to 36 keys per octave, just intonation or equal temperament, and two players required, it was pretty awkward. Mr. Cahill did build a third instrument; none has survived. It was replaced effectively and made obsolescent by the invention of the wireless. Dire predictions of the Telharmonium replacing existing orchestras have yet to happen.

One also remembers cartoons, when reel-to-reel recordings came in, showing one machine replacing the preacher in the pulpit and another replacing the congregation. Well, you can love an organist or a preacher but not a machine. "Nintendo® in high fidelity is, alas, still Nintendo®"; synthetic sound is still synthetic sound.

MAX B. MILLER, FAGO

